

esprit orchestra

Alex Pauk

music director and conductor



Transitions - Colin McPhee and Beyond

Jane Mallett Theatre, St. Lawrence Centre
Sunday, March 23, 1997

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Jane Mallett Theatre, St. Lawrence Centre

presented by  **RHÔNE-POULENC**

programme

Colin McPhee (Canada)

Transitions, 1954
for orchestra

Bob Becker (Canada)

Music On The Moon, 1996
world premiere *

intermission

Colin McPhee (Canada)

Concerto for Wind Orchestra, 1960

Colin McPhee (Canada)

Tabuh-Tabuhan, 1936
toccata for orchestra and 2 pianos

* *Music On The Moon* is an Esprit commission and was made possible through the financial assistance of the **Laidlaw Foundation**.

* This world premiere performance of *Music On The Moon*

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Transitions Colin McPhee

Transitions, completed in December 1954, was Colin McPhee's first work after a nine year absence from composing. Unlike most of McPhee's music, *Transitions* does not draw on Balinese musical or cultural materials, although the influence of the gamelan is sometimes evident. The composition does fit, however, within McPhee's established practice of drawing from traditional musics. In this case it is the British sea shanty, particularly *Lowlands Away*, that attracted McPhee and the interval and rhythm of that shanty's opening notes provide the basis for much of *Transitions*.

Transitions also reflects McPhee's other practice of evoking with his music a special atmosphere or place, "some legendary coastline, flooded with Arctic sunlight or lost in tropic fog." McPhee was initially drawn to *Lowlands Away* because it had been "fixed in [his own] mind for its nostalgia and special sea atmosphere." He had set the song in his 1929 *Sea Shanty Suite*, but it had been his long-time desire to use the sounds to compose a full orchestral work.

Transitions consists of three interconnected movements and a coda. The title describes the form in that it refers, according to McPhee, to "the changing moods and tempos

of the music, and to the musical structure, which consists of a series of thematically related episodes."

As in many of McPhee's large works the piano plays a significant role within the orchestra, and in this instance joins with glockenspiel and timpani to create an effect similar to that of the "nuclear gamelan" heard in *Tabuh-Tabuhan*.

Transitions was premiered by the Vancouver Symphony in March, 1955.

Music On The Moon Bob Becker

Music On The Moon was commissioned by Esprit Orchestra with a grant from the Laidlaw Foundation. Work on the piece was begun during a residency at the Leighton Colony of the Banff Centre for the Arts in June, 1996. It was completed in Toronto the following December.

The musical language used here is one that has been evolving in my music since as long ago as 1982 with *Palta*, a kind of concerto for the Indian *tabla* drums accompanied by traditional western percussion instruments. The approach became

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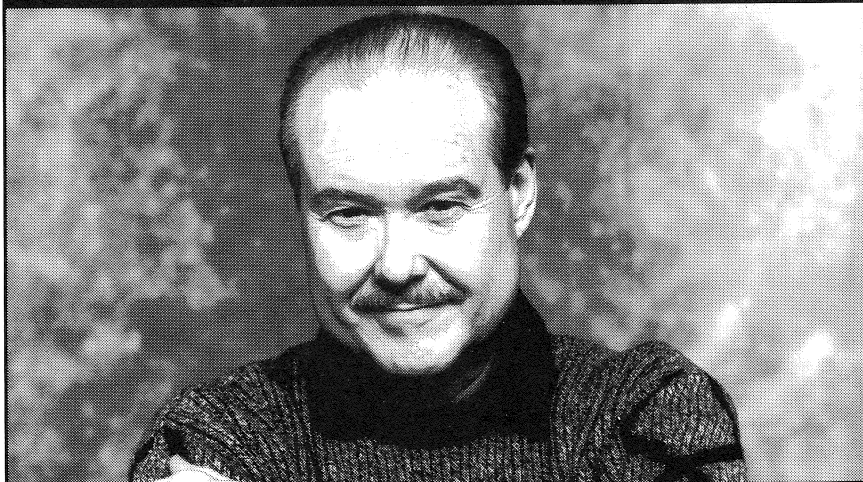
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explicit in 1990 with the percussion quintet *Mudra*, and has remained consistent in all of my music since that time, the idea being to extract a functional harmonic system from a purely melodic source - particularly *ragas* of Hindustani (North Indian) classical music. Although Indian music is usually characterized as being elaborately melodic with no harmony whatsoever (by western European definitions), my personal experience has always been one of subliminally perceived harmonic movement, a sensation that is clearly related to my cultural background and musical training. This kind of cross-referencing is always experienced when one strong cultural expression encounters another and, in my opinion, this perceptual phenomenon will be the defining issue in all of the arts and politics of the twenty-first century. Musically, I have found this effect to be most pronounced in *ragas* (most simply defined as generalized scales or particularized modes) which contain relatively few tones. In particular the pentatonic modes containing no fifth scale degree (for example, the *ragas Malkauns, Chandrakauns* and others) have, to my ear the most ambiguous and intriguing harmonic implications. *Rag Chandrakauns*, traditionally linked to the full moon and late-night hours and with the scale degrees tonic, minor third, fourth, minor sixth, major seventh, has

always attracted me. I have used these interval relationships to determine both the melodic and harmonic content of all of my music for the past ten years.

The image of the moon in general, and the full moon in particular, is a potent one for nearly every society in the world. There is great variety, however, in the interpretation of its significance. In North American culture alone the full moon is associated not only with romantic love and bountiful harvests, but as well with more sinister things such as mental imbalance, evil spirits and violence. I am intrigued by this psychological ambiguity, and it is reflected in the unsettled and dream-like character of the music. In any event, the moon is known to exert a gravitational pull on the earth and everything on it, including our own bodies and, perhaps, our minds.

Bob Becker

Concerto for Wind Orchestra
Colin McPhee

Concerto for Wind Orchestra was commissioned by Pittsburgh's American Wind Symphony, and was composed at a time of tremendous financial and emotional stress for McPhee. In a letter to his close friend, broadcaster Oliver Daniel

McPhee wrote: "I have not known a day or night free from tension and anxiety for months." In fact, McPhee was not sure whether he could complete the new work at all. Although late, McPhee did complete the concerto and it was premiered in July, 1960.

The commission for the concerto followed on the success of McPhee's 1957 *Symphony No. 2*, written for the St. Louis Symphony, and *Nocturne*, written in 1958 for the Contemporary Music Society (founded by Oliver Daniel). McPhee had originally intended it to contain no Balinese themes, writing to Virgil Thomson: "No Oriental ambience in any sense this time." In the end, however, it was filled with references to Bali, recalling in some ways a less jubilant *Tabuh-Tabuhan*. This is perhaps not too surprising, since in 1959 McPhee was putting the finishing touches on his draft for *Music in Bali* (published in 1966), and feelings of easier and happier times on his beloved island would have proved difficult to set aside.

Tabuh-Tabuhan
Colin McPhee

Tabuh-Tabuhan was composed in Mexico in 1936 and was first performed by the National Orchestra of Mexico City. It was

written after I had spent four years in Bali engaged in musical research, and is largely inspired, especially in its orchestration, by the various methods I had learned of Balinese gamelan technique. The title of the work derives from the Balinese word "tabuh", originally meaning the mallet used for striking a percussion instrument, but extended to mean strike or beat (the drum, a gong, xylophone, or metallophone). *Tabuh-Tabuhan* is thus a Balinese collective noun meaning different drum rhythms, metric forms, gong punctuations, gamelans and music essentially percussive. In a subtitle I call the work toccata for orchestra and two pianos.

Although *Tabuh-Tabuhan* makes much use of Balinese musical material, I consider it a purely personal work in which Balinese and composed motifs, melodies and rhythms have been fused to make a symphonic work. Balinese music never rises to an emotional climax, but at the same time has a terrific rhythmic drive and symphonic surge, and this partly influenced me in planning the form of the work. Many of the syncopated rhythms of Balinese music and American jazz have formed the basic impulse of the work from start to finish.

To transfer the intricate chime-like polyphonic figurations of the gamelan, keyed instruments and gong-chimes, I have used a "nuclear-

profiles

Bob Becker
composer

gamelan" composed of two pianos, celesta, xylophone, marimba and glockenspiel. These form the hard core of the orchestra. The various sounds produced by the hand-beaten drums are simulated by the pizzicati in the cellos and basses, low harp and staccato piano tones. I have included two Balinese gongs of special pitch, and Balinese cymbals, to which are added gong tones simulated by pianos, horns, etc. Around these more exotic resonances, a comparatively normal orchestra amplifies and extends the different timbres to their maximum intensity. For the rest, the percussion element is simple, including only large cymbal, triangle, sandpaper and bass drum.

The form of *Tabub-Tabuhan* is more or less that of the classical symphony. There are three movements: *Ostinatos*, *Nocturne*, and *Finale*. This may not be the place to point out all the purely Balinese motifs. Suffice it to say that the flute melody in the *Nocturne* is an entirely Balinese flute tune, taken down as played. The syncopated *Finale* is based on the gay music of the xylophone orchestras which accompany popular street dances. This is heard in its authentic form at the beginning of the work and given the grand treatment at the end.

Colin McPhee

Bob Becker holds Bachelor's and Master's degrees from the Eastman School of Music where he studied percussion with William Street and John Beck, and composition with Warren Benson and Aldo Provenzano. He also spent four years doing post-graduate study in the World Music programme at Wesleyan University, becoming intensely involved with the music of North and South India, Africa and Indonesia. As a founding member of the percussion ensemble Nexus, Becker has also been involved with the collection and construction of a unique multi-cultural body of instruments.

Becker's performing experience spans nearly all of the musical disciplines where percussion is found. He has been percussionist for the Marlboro Music Festival and timpanist with the Marlboro Festival Orchestra under Pablo Casals. For several years he was percussionist with the Paul Winter Consort and he has performed and recorded with Marion Brown, Gil Evans, Steve Gadd, Paul Horn and Chuck Mangione. He has appeared as tabla soloist in India and has accompanied many of the major artists of Hindustani music. Becker is also a founding member of the Flaming Dono West African Dance and Drum Ensemble in Toronto.



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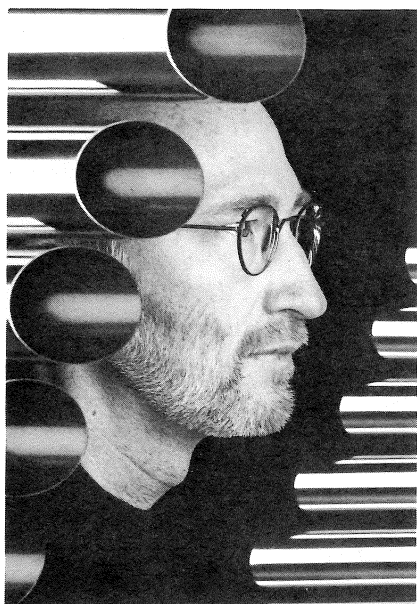
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With Nexus, Becker has appeared with the New York Philharmonic, the Boston Symphony, the Cleveland Orchestra and many others. As a regular member of the ensemble Steve Reich and Musicians, he has appeared with the Israel Philharmonic and the London Symphony and recorded for Deutsche Grammophone, EMI and Nonesuch. Generally considered to be one of the world's premiere virtuoso performers on the xylophone and marimba, Becker also appears regularly as an independent soloist and clinician.

Becker's compositions and arrangements are performed regularly by percussion groups world-wide. He has also had a long history of association with dance, creating music for New York's Joffrey Ballet and others. In 1991 he and Joan Phillips received the National Arts Centre Award for the best collaboration between composer and choreographer at Toronto's INDE '91 dance festival. Recent works include *There is Time*, commissioned by Rina Singha and the Danny Grossman Dance Company; *Noodrem*, commissioned through The Canada Council by the Dutch ensemble Slagwerkgroep Den Haag; *Turning Point*, composed for Nexus, and *Cryin' Time*, a setting of poetry by Canadian artist Sandra Meigs. His solo CD, *There is Time*, (1995) features many of his recent compositions.

Colin McPhee composer

Colin McPhee was born in Montreal in 1900, moving to Toronto with his family in 1913. As a boy in Toronto McPhee studied piano and composition with Ernest Farmer and within a very short period of time attracted a great deal of attention within the music community for his talents. In 1918 he moved to Baltimore to study at the Peabody Conservatory with Gustav Strube (composition) and Harold Randolph (piano). McPhee's talent for composition particularly emerged during that time, but after returning to Toronto in 1921 he concentrated



Bob Becker, composer

on his piano studies, receiving significant acclaim for his artistry as a performer as well.

In 1924 McPhee moved to Paris to study, compose and perform. In 1926 he settled in New York, quickly becoming involved with the many societies newly established for contemporary composers in the United States - including the League of Composers and the International Composers' Guild. McPhee only became an American citizen after 1940, but from the time he moved to the U.S. critics and other writers on music claimed him as among the best American composers. (In 1933 McPhee was listed among American composers "who have developed indigenous materials or are specially interested in expressing some phase of the American spirit in their work.")

Among McPhee's earliest successes were the 1928 *Concerto for Piano and Wind Octette*, the 1929 *Sea Shanty Suite* for baritone solo, male chorus, two pianos and timpani, and music he composed for experimental films by Ralph Steiner.

In the late 1920s, McPhee heard recordings of percussion orchestras from Java and Bali (gamelan). He was fascinated with the subtle interplay of rhythm and sonorities of the gongs, gong-chimes, metallo-phones, drums and cymbals, and in 1931 set out to explore the music

further in Bali, along with his wife anthropologist Jane Belo. The two returned to Paris briefly in 1932, but McPhee became disenchanted with western life and western music and returned to Bali that same year. While there, McPhee devoted himself entirely to Balinese culture, tradition and music. He worked closely with local musicians, learning to play the various instruments of the gamelan and forming a gamelan club in his own village.

While in Bali, McPhee did not lose touch with the United States. He visited New York in 1935 to 1936, bringing Bali with him through his music and films he had made in his new home.

After his permanent return to the United States in 1939, McPhee continued composing, lecturing and writing, often with fellowships from the prestigious Guggenheim and Bollingen Foundations. But McPhee received little recognition for his work while still alive. Having had only sporadic success with his compositions, McPhee suffered long periods of personal depression and tremendous financial difficulties. Prior to his death in 1964, McPhee had been teaching at UCLA - a position that granted him at least some relief from his financial stresses. He died believing his Balinese-influenced music of the early 1930s was a failure. It was only after his death that his book

Music in Bali was published, and only within the past two decades has the full impact of McPhee's music and creative influence on other composers been recognized.

Alex Pauk conductor

As a conductor and composer, Alex Pauk has been a leading exponent of new music in Canada since graduating from the University of Toronto Faculty of Music in 1971. After graduation he participated in the Ontario Arts Council Conductor's Workshop for two years, then continued his studies in Tokyo, at the Toho Gakuen School of Music, and in Europe.

In the early 1970s, Pauk settled in Vancouver, and in 1975 was named Vancouver's Musician of the Year. While there he helped establish the new music group Days Months and Years to Come, for which he was Music Director and Conductor until 1979. Before moving to Vancouver, he had been instrumental in establishing ArrayMusic in Toronto and was its first conductor. Pauk returned to Toronto in 1980 and in 1983 founded Esprit Orchestra.

Pauk was Co-Chair for the ISCM World Music Days held in Toronto

and Montreal in 1984. In 1986 he was Music Director and Conductor of the Satori Festival of New Canadian Music held in Winnipeg.

In his role as Music Director and Conductor, Pauk is committed to the development of a Canadian musical literature. This commitment has led to Esprit's commissioning of over forty new works by over thirty-five Canadian composers. Along with careful attention to programming, Pauk's work as Esprit's Music Director involves a strong role in the development of the orchestra's *Toward a Living Art* education and outreach programme.

As a composer, Pauk has written over thirty-five concert works and has received commissions from the CBC, New Music Concerts (Toronto), Vancouver New Music Society, The Quebec Symphony Orchestra, the Toronto Symphony, leading Indian dancer/choreographer Menaka Thakkar, harpist Erica Goodman, the Hannaford Street Silver Band and many others. He has also composed for film, television, radio and music theatre.

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Alex Pauk
music director and conductor

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